

## **a long, lonely time** by **LucilleBarker**

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**Summary:** Jim Hopper and Joyce Byers have been to hell and back, and time has changed Hopper quite a bit. (Set in a post-series world where the Upside Down has finally been defeated.)

## a long, lonely time

Jim Hopper stared through his reflection in the mirror. It was over. The Upside-Down, the demagorgons, government conspiracies, Hawkins itself—gone. His was mired in blotchy purple marks, temporary additions to the scars that had come with a year or two of torture. Shaving was something he had been putting off because it would bring more of those marks to light.

El had tugged at his long beard and scraggly grey hair when they had reunited. She had grown up so much, but her large brown eyes were still those of the little girl he found wandering the forest in a pink dress and his old flannel shirt. Her tight embrace had nearly suffocated him, and he didn't mind one bit.

He took a deep breath, turned on the bathroom faucet, splashed cold water on his face, and grabbed a nearby towel to drag across his head and cheeks. The pressure against his bruises gave his nervous system a painful shock. But for the last year, pain had been a reminder that he was alive. He couldn't numb himself with Tuinol, booze, or even cigarettes. For the first time in his life, Jim Hopper had to face horror completely sober. And deep down, he knew that he could never go back—no steady routine of heavy substance abuse could offer any relief. *Plus*, he thought, *who wants to come back from the dead only to kill yourself with drugs and drink?*

Hopper opened the bathroom door and meandered his way through the unfamiliar hallway, bumping against the wall. It was Joyce Byers's house, but it wasn't the house that had been Joyce's home. There would be no damaged wall from a desperate mother trying to hack her way into another dimension with an ax. God, it still sounded crazy just thinking about it. Of course, who was he to say? He adopted a telekinetic child that had been used as a lab experiment.

"Hey, Hop, are you done in there?" Joyce called, snapping him out of his thoughts and shooting him back to real.

"Y-yeah," Hopper responded.

"Great, meet me out here, okay?"

Hopper's brow furrowed and he followed Joyce's voice to the small space used as a dining area. In the center of the table stood long stem candle which had lost half of its height from the last time it was used and the flame from the wick was trying a little to hard to compensate for it's lost height. Two places were set opposite each other, covered with noodles and meatballs and marinara.

And then there was Joyce, coming out of the kitchen. Wearing a simple black dress, with small sleeves that capped her shoulders and a skirt that reached the top of her knee. Her own bruises and scrapes were on display, but here she was wearing a smile and holding a bottle of wine. *Beautiful*, he thought.

"Hey, what's all this?" he asked.

"The kids are out at a movie—well, two movies, there's a double feature or something. Anyway, I thought that we could have a nice dinner."

Dinner?

*Enzo's at seven, meeting you there?*

*No, you pick me up.*

*Picking you up...*

*Yeah, it's a date.*

"Okay," he nodded.

"Yeah," she replied. "I mean, we earned it right. After everything... I know the plan was originally to go to Enzo's but I thought what with the world-saving and the respective black eyes and bruises we have, maybe we should keep it simple. But, I made some spaghetti—I mean, obviously, duh. I would have made lasagna but I already had these ingredients. And I don't have any beer, but I have this wine... and I guess it would be more for me since you don't really drink anymore after being held hostage in a—y'know what, I'm gonna put this away and stop talking now."

Joyce turned on her heel and escaped to the kitchen. He blinked as

he processed what was happening. It wasn't as if either of them could forget their plans for Enzo's. But he had expected, almost hoped, that she would move on. Find someone who would be good for her and the kids. Another Bob Newby. And yet, here she was. Preparing and planning a date they had promised each other so long ago.

He needed to set her straight.

Joyce returned, waving her hands. "Alright, wine has been put away. It's like it never happened." She paused and took a breath. "So, what do you think?"

"Huh."

"I'm gonna need more than a grunt and a monosyllable, Hop."

Jesus, he needed a drink. Or a cigarette. *No*, said a voice deep in his subconscious. A voice that sounded too much like his daughter standing her ground.

"Joyce, I think I'd rather skip dinner," he admitted.

Her smile fell, and he watched her demeanor make an immediate shift from flirty to mortified.

"Oh. Sorry. God this is embarrassing—" She bent forward to blow out the candle.

"No, that's not it," he stopped her. The flame remained, and Joyce pulled herself upwards. her eyes were wide and open as she crossed her arms as if it would protect her from something unseen. They were both so good at shielding themselves from unknown threats, ready to fight. And he was so tired.

"We've been through so much, you and me. Everything that's happened, everything that's come after our kids—they all nearly killed us. Years of monsters and torture, and we spent so much of it trying to be normal. And I can't do it anymore."

"Hop..."

Hopper stepped forward and reached out to take his hand in his.

Joyce's hands had always been small in his, but now he could see what time and terror had done to them both. Age spots, wrinkles, cuts stitched up and smaller purple spots that were starting to fade into green and yellow. He wrapped his fingers around her hand with as much tenderness as he was capable.

"I've missed so many chances because I was trying to do the right thing. Trying to do the normal thing. And I just want to be with you, Joyce. Skip the dinners and the dates and the bullshit that comes with pretending that I don't already know that this is it. You are what I want more than anything. I don't want to waste anymore time."

Joyce's gaze was focused on their entwined hands, and she released a shaky breath that she had been holding.

"Wow," she whispered. It was the best response he could have hoped for, really.

"Yeah," Hopper grinned.

Joyce's free hand caught his and she brought it up to her lips to press a kiss against his knuckles. When she pulled away, she leaned in against him and buried her face into his chest. Hopper closed his eyes and folded his arms around her, resting his chin on top of her head and relaxing into the embrace. They stood there together, quiet and engaged in the nearness that they had evaded and avoided for far too long.

"That's what I want, too," Joyce said. "But I made this big meal for us and I'm kind of hungry. So maybe we can discuss this while we eat?"

Hopper huffed out a short laugh, rubbing her back as she muffled giggles into his chest. He kissed the top of her head. "Sure."